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COMMENTARY

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Colonising public engagement: Revealing the "expert–lay" divisions formed by academia's dominant praxis

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Public engagement is an important feature of research into societal issues and challenges. Complex issues such as responses to climate change, environmental degradation, and fuel and food poverty require a closer link between academic research and publics if action relating to these challenges is to be harnessed collectively. The past two decades have seen an increase in efforts to form closer links between publics and academics. However, much of the activities associated with forming such links remain embedded within motivations defined by academics. Not only are these motivations defined by academics, but their success is often aligned with outcomes formed by the perspectives and targets of academics. Thus, "expert–lay" divisions are placed at the centre of the processes which initiate, facilitate, and report on public engagement. This paper engages with recent developments in public engagement to reveal the "expert–lay" divisions that allow academia to colonise the spaces and processes of public engagement. Using contemporary definitions of colonisation, this commentary demonstrates how academia forms a dominant praxis around spaces and outcomes of engagement. Overall, a reflexive approach to allow added opportunities for engagement to be facilitated by non-academic actors is recommended, while the influences of different academic disciplines in defining the possibilities for such opportunities is acknowledged.

KEYWORDS
decolonisation, disciplinarity, public engagement, reflexivity

1 | INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Public engagement is currently a pertinent subject and practice for academic researchers. Global challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, and fuel and food poverty have significantly quashed the efficacy of technocratic approaches (Cameron, 2000; Moseley et al., 2015). The inability of technocratic and expert knowledges to account for "other worldviews" is a longstanding tension between academic circles, technocratic governments, and publics (Barnett, 2015, p. 135). The presence of terms such as 'lay' expose the clear division society tends to harbour between the experts and "others." The 'others' in this sense are bound by a public sphere and operate within the boundaries of daily life and non-expert knowledges (Yearley, 2000).

Enhancements in communication technology and neoliberal globalisation in the 1990s were key mechanisms in establishing closer ties between publics and academic research (Bridge & Wood, 2005). The Bodmer Report, published in 1985

by the Royal Society, UK, encapsulated this shift. The report outlined the need to increase society's scientific literacy and drafted recommendations on how public scientific knowledge could be enhanced and measured (The Royal Society, 1985). Further, the increased availability of innovative products across the globe meant publics sought more information about such products and their research-led development. This was often to understand risks (e.g., with genetically modified foods) and/or by developing an interest in specific technological advances (e.g., in the automotive industry; Choi, 2015; Bredahl, 2001). Stone (2013) expansively documents the development and evolution of transnational knowledge networks, which included the exchange of technical and/or scientific knowledges, in this period. By its simplest characterisation, neoliberal globalisation pushed for knowledge development, mobilisation and innovation to create emergent economic markets with new products, and new services (Brewer et al., 2016). A second condition for increased engagement was the growing access to information and misinformation. In some circumstances expert communities, including academics, perceived increased access to information as a risk (Weigold, 2001). A communication culture based on the need to tackle misconceptions and the risks associated with the poor contextualisation of expert knowledges was developed as a response (Weingart et al., 2000). Communication culture refers to how communication is characterised by a specific group, in this case academics, and their collective motivations justify how and why they communicate with each other and others (Cameron, 2000). Primarily, this period saw a collective and conscious effort to form a dialogue between academia and publics, but much of the dialogue was underpinned by a deficit approach aligned to the Bodmer Report's recommendations (Royal Society, 1985). Publics can only be *receivers* of scientific knowledge within these forms of communication and their knowledge-base is equivalenced with their capacity to understand the communicated knowledges (Ahteensuu, 2011).

Importantly, scholars such as Wynne critiqued the Bodmer Report's approach to public engagement and the communication culture that developed. Influentially, Wynne (1992) indicates that the application of knowledge, whether expert or colloquial, is shaped by the audience receiving knowledges as much as those generating knowledges. Hence, his resistance towards the idea of publics being merely an empty vessel for existing scientific knowledge as framed by the communication culture outlined above. Whether Wynne's theoretical insights were the main instigator is unclear, but the early 1990s saw the proliferation of public consultations (Catt & Murphy, 2003). However, contrary to Wynne (1996), public consultations aligned with a deficit model and the dialogues between experts and publics primarily focused on 'educating publics' (Chilvers, 2012). Thus maintaining a strong division between expert knowledges and 'lay' audiences.

Since 2000, there have been scholarly advances in reflexive approaches. These reflexive approaches not only theorise academic individuals as agents of dialogue but delve into richer insights on the dynamic characteristics of the public sphere (Oughton & Bracken, 2009). Here, publics can form around different subjects and objects, and individuals can express different characteristics (i.e., roles and responsibilities) when they are part of a particular public (Barr, 2011; Clayton & Vickers, 2017). The effort to reflect on how academics shape their dialogues, even in informal settings, through their personal characteristics and relationships has been a positive step towards understanding how inclusive dialogues around alternative technologies (e.g., electric vehicles) can be developed (Esmene et al., 2017). In summary, this reflexive view of dialogue between academia and publics reveals a multiplicity and heterogeneity relating to the agents of dialogue, i.e., specific academics and specific individuals in a public.

This commentary paper highlights how the multiplicity of actors, hence, intentions of engagement, are often overlooked in specific cases of public engagement. This essentially manifests in conditions for public engagement that are colonised by a dominant praxis. The form of colonisation this paper exposes is more subtle than a distinct 'expert-lay' division, but dictates the spaces and processes of engagement.

2 | PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND DOMINANT PRAXES

The development of a dominant praxis within any communication or dialogical context is defined by the power relations between the communicating actors and their motivations for communication (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). Within neoliberal economic contexts, engagement tends to facilitate access to knowledges across global publics. Potential new products and services, and new markets act as overarching motivations for engagement (Brewer et al., 2016). The way that products and advertising are adapted to suit cultural nuances favoured by consumers in a new neoliberal geography demonstrates this engagement. This notion is particularly prominent in aligning beauty products with cultural constructs of beauty (Woodward-Smith & Eynullaeva, 2009). In this sense knowledges are democratised as 'expert–lay' divisions defining access to knowledge are lifted. However, the praxis of this engagement is dominated by neoliberal economic motivations and this praxis confines the engagement formed to a particular space and aim, for example, to emerging markets and economic growth (Fuller & Geddes, 2008). This approach to engagement closely resonates with definitions of colonialism. In essence, knowledge is mobilised through a dominant lens and the knowledges of the engaged actors are confined into a space and/

or aim prioritised by a dominant praxis and motivation (Horvath, 1972). Overall, democratisation takes place at a superficial level and by proxy a rigid space and/or aim is formed by the dominant praxis within a specific engagement context. Thus, the instigators of the dominant praxis can be defined as a coloniser when situated in the spaces of engagement.

The neoliberal economic case of 'expert–lay' interaction used as an exemplar above demonstrates the definition of colonisation put forward by this paper. This definition may at first seem extreme to apply to public engagement led by academics. However, recent developments in higher education policy to promote public engagement (such as, the Research Excellence Framework in the UK and various international funding opportunities to address public engagement) have formed the conditions for the colonisation described above to be adopted (Research Excellence Framework, 2020; European Commission, 2016). This colonisation can manifest in two ways. The first of these is influenced by the incongruity of public engagement to the tradition and practice of certain academic disciplines. The physical sciences are deeply embedded in a positivist epistemology, which views human interpretation and agency as a contaminant to physicalist ontologies of knowledge (Ney, 2006). This places a clear 'expert–lay' division to any engagement by default and when considered in relation to knowledges generated by, for example astrophysics, this relationship is widely accepted (Kapon et al., 2009). The emergence of celebrity physicists is by no means a new phenomenon but advances in online communication and social media have pushed their outreach much more widely (Fahy, 2015). Essentially, they are 'champions' of their discipline. Hence, the colonisation of the spaces and processes of public engagement by such actors remains the norm across such disciplines.

Alternatively, disciplinary approaches led by an interpretivist lens express a wider range of approaches to public engagement. The interpretivist approach allows for knowledges to be shaped and shared by multiple actors and contexts (Lincoln, 2009). Thus, there is a multiplicity to the spaces and processes of engagement between the academics and publics. Generally, the condition of knowledge generation under interpretivism dilutes 'expert–lay' divisions and allows for engagement by democratising knowledge (Wynne, 1992). It would be easy to assume that engagement and knowledge mobilisation under such conditions could not be “colonial” and is fundamentally democratised. However, such an assumption overlooks the multiplicity of the actors and their motivations around engagement and knowledge mobilisation.

The pursuit of a specific motivation to initiate engagement is often led by a particular actor (Gregson et al., 2011; Owen et al., 2012). Consequently, the initiator of engagement can dominate the spaces, forms, and purpose of engagement and define a dominant praxis. In essence, specific individuals and institutions from the public sphere and academia are brought together by this praxis. Specific motivations, often based on impact agenda targets, funding requirements and/or pre-existing links between individuals and institutions, act as strong influences in forming the spaces and outcomes of engagement (Watermeyer, 2014). Herein, motivations for engagement are led by targets set for or by academia. This gives academics an added impetus to initiate engagement and establish a dominant praxis. Further, the emergence of academic best practice guidelines for engagement consolidate academia's dominant position (Research Excellence Framework, 2020; van der Linden et al., 2015). Such guidelines set a prescriptive precedent for engagement and form relationships with individuals in the public sphere deemed as an appropriate proxy for all publics. Although this is a positive step for engagement, the establishment of a single public group to shape an academic department's wider research (as presented in Maguire et al., 2019) is indicative of the above. This notion forms a stronger 'expert–lay' division by homogenising publics into a single sphere constructed by the expert. Additionally, the emergence of systematic reviews on public engagement suggest the dominant praxis not only defines appropriate representatives of the public sphere but shapes future engagement by defining indicators of success (O'Connor et al., 2016). This desire to homogenise and replicate successful cases again establishes an 'expert–lay' divide and colonises the spaces, and processes of engagement.

3 | CONCLUSION

Narrowing the spaces and processes of public engagement tends to create outcomes most relevant to the dominant praxis leading the process. Similar to traditional definitions of colonisation, this can produce frameworks and structures of practice, knowledges and understanding that exclude spaces and processes that are attributable to actors outside of the dominant praxis (Turnbull, 1997). Although the instrumental rigour provided by scientific approaches should be acknowledged in providing an objective construct of a studied phenomenon, more complex constructs such as the societal use and application of a studied phenomenon rely heavily on recognising the contextualities of non-academic actors (Dunlap, 2008). Public engagement with academic research can benefit from occurring in spaces and under the processes defined by publics; thus, moving beyond parameters set by academics and producing outcomes that are more representative of other praxes. Essentially, this decolonises public engagement through removing the 'expert–lay' divisions that are apparent in the motivations for engagement and by moving away from cases that view an engaged group as a proxy for all publics. It should be

acknowledged that this is in no way a blueprint for all public engagement and there will be scenarios where operating within parameters set by academics would be more appropriate (such as the example outlined in this paper relating to the physical sciences). Overall, this paper advocates a reflexive approach to engagement to recognise and fulfil opportunities for engagement where motivations, spaces, and processes are defined by non-academic actors.

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